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Mainstream school's VS. SEN: A thematic analysis exploring teacher's perspectives on children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder's (ASD) behaviour in mainstream school's vs Special Educational Needs (SEN).

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Mainstream school's VS. SEN: A thematic analysis exploring teacher's perspectives on children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder's (ASD) behaviour in mainstream school's vs Special Educational Needs (SEN).

### **ABSTRACT**

There has been extensive research surrounding Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) pupils in support for their inclusion in the mainstream school environment, but limited research has focused on behavioural difficulties from both the mainstream teacher and Special Educational Needs (SEN) perspective collectively. This qualitative study aimed to explore how mainstream and SEN teachers perceive pupils with ASD being situated in either mainstream or SEN schooling based on the behavioural difficulties. Therefore, the present study explores a contribution of both teacher's perspectives to develop an in-depth understanding of a mixture of experiences. To form an account of various perspectives and experiences, a snowball sample was used to recruit four mainstream teachers and four SEN teachers. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted and analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis. Three highlighting themes emerged from the data: 'Routine and Consistency', 'Enhancement of Social Skills', and 'Peer Understanding and Interaction'. These findings suggest that there are benefits to both mainstream and SEN schooling; the opportunity to receive education in a mainstream environment can aid the improvement of the behaviour of an individual with ASD depending on the routine, peer understanding and social interaction. The results of this research are critically evaluated in full.

KEY WORDS:	AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER	SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS	EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION	MAINSTREAM SCHOOL	THEMATIC ANALYSIS
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## Introduction

### Educational Inclusion

The inclusion procedure to education allows all students to be able to learn within the mainstream schooling environment with the opportunity to contribute equally and learn effectively without being segregated; many researchers would argue that inclusion broadens learning opportunities (Yeung, 2012). Inclusion highlights the right that all students have in being accepted into a mainstream school without being discriminated against.

Previous research indicates that the number of pupils receiving education in mainstream schools has increased over the past decade; following the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), inclusive education became highlighted as an area of concern and the final statement emphasised that inclusion of SEN children was 'a right and matter of social justice' (McAllister and Hadjri, 2013). In order to develop educational inclusion in practice, arguably the need to re-address the focus of the specialist school, address the specialist resources needed in the mainstream school environment, and the need to reform the mainstream schools understanding of diversity within the education systems is necessary (Cheminais, 2003). With these matters being addressed, arguably this can offer enhanced educational opportunities for those students with SEN as when it is uncertain which type of education that child should be allocated, there would be a lessened concern as to which education might benefit them if the correct resources and training were placed equally and generously to all teachers and educational settings.

### Autism and Inclusion

Given the fact that children and adolescents who have ASD are representative of about 1% of the school population in the UK (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009), arguably the need to look into the extent to which these individual's needs are being adhered to is necessary due to the rise of numbers of children with autism attending mainstream schooling (Bradley, 2016). 71% of children with autism attend mainstream schools despite the availability of the specialist school (Priory Education and Children's Services, 2018), emphasising that although there is recognition surrounding the difficulties children with ASD face with their peers, the parents and professionals are more preferential of inclusion in the mainstream environment (Kasari et al. 1999 as cited in Kasari et al., 2011).

It can be argued that the placement of children with ASD in the mainstream school environment increases the involvement of that child in general education, setting them

up for the 'real' world post education. Through including children with ASD in a mainstream setting this allows the individual to model the behaviour of peers and helps others to understand and appreciate diversity (Guralnick 1990; Villa et al. 1995, as cited in Kasari et al., 2011). However, there is plenty research that exemplifies the many social benefits and risks for children with ASD in the mainstream school setting (Kasari et al., 2011) which will be explored further.

Furthermore, research identifies that 63% of children with ASD do not receive their education in the type of school that their parents perceive would be of the most support to that child (National Autistic Society, no date). This arguably conveys the parental perception of the issue regarding monitoring the resources and support that children with autism have and receive within their educational setting. Debatably, as most pupils with autism are attending mainstream schooling rather than specialist educational settings, this could highlight the lack of support and resources that mainstream school environments have in supporting those children with ASD. However, improving and assisting academic and social development for children with ASD can be a difficult challenge as due to the heterogeneity of the disorder, there is not one concluding approach that would meet every child with autisms needs (Parsons et al., 2009). Researcher Allen (2008, as cited in Ravet, 2011) supports this in stating that there is not one comprehensible way to inform inclusive practice in schools which can account for the irregularity that shapes educational inclusion.

Despite the difficulty in informing inclusive practice, there are two contradictory perspectives that are outlined in inclusive literature which are the 'rights-based' perspective and the 'needs-based' perspective (Cigman, 2007; Allen, 2008, as cited in Ravet, 2011). The 'rights-based' perspective is completely all for the end to educational exclusion and highlights the right that every student has for social and academic inclusion. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the 'needs-based' perspective conveys the understanding of the lack of research and evidence behind educational inclusion and the dangers that can arise from a child with ASD being in the mainstream environment (Ravet, 2011). It is clear from the literature surrounding inclusion that both perspectives are as common as each other as with autism being such a heterogeneous disorder, despite inclusion being a right to all individuals in education, it can completely depend on the individual and their needs with regard to which schooling environment they would be best situated in.

The overriding conclusion of many research studies surrounding autism and inclusive education is arguably attributed to a lack of understanding of ASD among teachers and minimal awareness around techniques and approaches to teaching and how to construct the learning environment to support those with ASD. With this being said, teachers and support staff require extra training in order to progress with their

professional development to accommodate for diversity and all children's needs in order to provide equal opportunities for all students.

### **ASD and behavioural difficulties**

Previous literature identifies that individuals with ASD struggle with behavioural and emotional problems that extend beyond social communication and repetitive, inflexible behaviour patterns that the disorder mainly associates ASD maladaptive behaviour with (Smith, 2016:121). Research conducted by Holcombe et al. (2016) emphasises how ASD is diagnosed when patterns of differences in behaviour are noticeable in observations. As ASD is a heterogeneous disorder, with no cognitive theory being universal to all individuals with autism (Rajendran and Mitchell, 2007), this causes their behaviour to be potentially unpredictable as not all individuals with autism portray the same behaviour patterns. It is this unpredictability that can cause problems for teachers in the classroom due to the behaviour of an individual with ASD differing from day to day.

Arguably, inclusion of children with ASD can present significant challenges to teachers which several large-scale studies have supported (Batten and Daly 2006; Batten et al. 2006; HMIE 2006; Jones et al. 2008, as cited in Ravet, 2011) Furthermore, children with ASD are arguably more inclined to find the classroom and school environment very challenging which can result in the teachers and teaching assistants in control of that child feeling challenged due to the child's behaviour which is resulting from frustration. Research conveys that in order to support the individual with autism through the challenges that come with mainstreaming, an empathetic approach is needed and the need to understand the child with autism's perception of the world is significant by looking through the 'autism lens' (Brown, 2015).

Furthermore, research conducted by Brown (2015) identifies that The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, 2013) conveys how behavioural symptoms of ASD may not show until they are triggered as 'social demands exceed limited capacities' which therefore may provide an explanation behind why perhaps disruptive, maladaptive behaviours may occur in especially the mainstream school environment. Bradley (2016) identifies reports of children with ASD experiencing more rejection from peers, being more susceptible to being bullied and receive less social support from peers. This again can provide a potential explanation behind any maladaptive, disruptive behaviour if children with autism are not receiving the help and support they need for their optimal development.

### **This Present Study**

An issue with previous research is that it tends to focus on inclusive schools, academic achievement and the assistance and support put in place for ASD pupils in the mainstream setting from mainly the inclusive school teacher's perspective. Therefore, research does not tend to consider the comparison of perspectives of SEN teachers and inclusive teachers collaboratively on ASD pupils and their behavioural difficulties within each type of schooling.

Conducting a piece of research that compares both types of teacher's perspectives can outline benefits and drawbacks of each type of schooling regarding ASD pupil's behavioural difficulties. Therefore, methods of assisting any issues can potentially be thought of with a collaborative approach. The SEN school was not the focus in previous research, therefore this study will include the perspectives of SEN teachers as well as mainstream teachers.

By using semi-structured interviews to compare teacher's perspectives, this can improve on previous research as when both perspectives are gathered from teachers with individual experiences and the responses are compared, suggestions can be made for learning plans and interventions to be put in place for areas of schooling that teachers may find they, or the ASD pupils, are struggling with regarding their behaviour. Also, as the research is gathering teacher's perceptions, this can improve on previous research in the sense of discovering what teachers find difficult when dealing with pupils with ASD and plans to help teachers support all pupils more effectively can potentially be arranged with additional research.

## **Research Question**

How do both mainstream and SEN teachers perceive ASD children's behavioural difficulties within each schooling environment?"

## **Methodology**

### **Qualitative research approach**

A qualitative research approach was implemented as the research topic required looking at a specific group of people's perspectives. Qualitative research intends to understand the unique perspective of individuals based on their own experiences, which is important for this present study as Lapan et al. (2012) convey how 'qualitative research...examines social settings from insiders' perspectives and generates descriptions and analyses of contexts...'. Therefore, qualitative research pursues any



issues within everyday context and discovers the subjective viewpoints and perspectives of those closely involved (Smythe and Giddings, 2007).

Due to the present study wanting to explore teacher's perspectives on children with ASD being situated in mainstream schools or SEN schools based on the behavioural difficulties, this method allows the researcher to develop an in depth understanding of each participant's personal experiences.

### **Recruitment of participants**

For the current study, a sample of four mainstream school teachers and four SEN school teachers were recruited as the study focused on teacher's perspectives of children with ASD being situated within each particular type of schooling. As the sample included a mixture of mainstream and SEN teachers, this allowed the current study to differentiate from existing studies which did not tend to look into the mixture of mainstream and SEN teacher's perspectives collectively.

Participants were gathered through a snowball sample where the first participant was recruited through an invitation letter and following the data collection was asked to recommend another participant who fitted the inclusion criteria of being either a mainstream or SEN teacher. A sample size of eight participants seemed appropriate as due to the study needing to grasp a full understanding of each participant's experience, a small sample size is necessary so that there is the ability to gain the most in depth understanding of the data possible due to its time-consuming nature (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Each participant was informed that the study had gained ethical approval from Manchester Metropolitan University Psychology Department and was made aware that the study followed the 'Codes of Ethics and Conduct' ethical guidelines from BPS (2009). The participants all had experience of teaching a child with ASD within their time as a teacher.

### **Utilising semi-structured interviews**

Due to the study exploring teacher's experiences, individual semi-structured interviews were employed in this study to build conversations with the participants and to influence the most in-depth discussion possible in order to gather the most effective data. The interviews consisted of five closed-ended questions which discovered the background of the participants teaching career and eight open-ended questions; the questions were

sourced to answer the research topic of ASD children in mainstream and SEN schools and followed the interview schedule that the researcher had completed.

Utilising semi-structured interviews was appropriate for this study as the topic requires elaborative discussion from mainstream and SEN teachers in order to fully understand their perspectives. As the responses from participants expressed a reasonable amount of perception into the topic that each participant wanted to convey, using semi-structured interviews was an effective method of data collection in this study. This is because semi-structured interviews are suitable to study individuals ‘...understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective...’ Taylor (2014).

Authenticity is a key aspect of why semi-structured interviewing was the most effective method of data collection as each interview expresses the reality of an everyday context from varying perspectives. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in response as although the interview has structure, individuals can elaborate in as much depth as they feel necessary for each question asked.

The researcher designed the interview schedule which was constructed around previous literature for guidance which focused on ASD pupils being situated in either mainstream or SEN schools and ASD children’s behaviour within the classroom/school environment. The interview schedule was designed to be comprehensive and allowed for participant’s elaboration. Prior to the conduction of each interview, each participant received an invitation letter after being recommended to the researcher as fitting of the inclusion criteria from the previous participant. Participants also signed a consent form. Following this, after participants gave their permission, the interviews were conducted within a quiet, safe environment which was agreed between the participant and the researcher and recorded on the researcher’s password protected computer. After the interview was completed, participants were given a debrief sheet which contained the contact details of the university counselling service and the information of the Samaritans webpage in case they were emotionally affected by any of the questions in the interview.

## **Data analysis**

Following the data collection, the data was transcribed onto a password-protected computer which the researcher only had access and all the audio recordings of each interview were erased. The anonymity of participant’s identities was ensured and kept by using individual pseudonyms that were chosen by the researcher and participant. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of this study as Guest et al. (2012) conveys that thematic analysis would be appropriate as it is an

advantageous way to apprehend and make sense of the intricacies behind the interviews and what each participant expresses individually.

## Analysis and discussion

For the analysis, thematic analysis was applied which established three key concepts displayed within the data. These fundamental themes condense a collaboration of understanding from both mainstream and SEN teacher's perspectives of ASD children being situated in either the mainstream or SEN school environment and the behavioural difficulties faced by those teachers. Therefore, with the analysis of the qualitative data, the data gathered aims to answer the research question *"How do both mainstream and SEN teachers perceive ASD children's behavioural difficulties within each schooling environment?"*. In response to the interview questions, three key themes were revealed: 'Routine and Consistency', 'Enhancement of Social Skills, and 'Peer Understanding and Interaction'. It is identified whether the participants were either a mainstream or SEN teacher below the range of quotes which are included under each theme.

### Theme 1- Routine and consistency

In response to questions regarding the behaviour of ASD children within either a mainstream or SEN environment in an average lesson, it was clear following discussion that routine and consistency was key to reduce behaviour difficulties from day to day. The following quotes support research conducted by Humphrey (2008:43) who identifies that to assist pupils with ASD more easily into the school environment, if a schedule was created this '...allows them to know the daily routine and be aware, in advance, of what events will be happening on a given day' which would arguably help with the reduction of maladaptive behaviour if the child's routine was consistent. They suggest that routine is extremely important for a child with autism.

*"they get a clear routine from day to day so they know what's coming next. I think that's beneficial for them so they know that they have a clear mindset and they don't get confused or agitated about it"*

*(Anita (mainstream primary teacher), 13-15)*

*"Occasionally an ASD pupil may distract others with their behaviour but this is usually mitigated with structural responses built in to each lesson plan with the assistance from support staff. Clear boundaries and strategies are in place for each individual"*

*(Jack (SEN teacher), 27-30)*

*“Structure, consistency and routine are vital and we use plenty of visual symbols and use of traffic lights...we use clear behaviour strategies and work behaviour varies dramatically but the children are very reliant on staff and the consistency of staff”*

*(Kim (SEN teacher), 17-19)*

*“they have a clear routine that is set out by their timetable which allows them to develop independence because they have to follow their timetable”*

*(Sophie (mainstream secondary teacher), 17-19)*

On the other hand, research suggests that the mainstream environment is less equipped than the SEN environment to support the needs of individuals with ASD as research by Emam and Farrell (2009:408) highlights that as pupils with ASD present individual, personal expressions, and struggle with understanding others socially and emotionally, the teachers may also find it difficult to understand the individual differences of each pupil with autism; they may struggle to accommodate for each pupil with autism's individual needs. Arguably, this can also account for the routine in a mainstream environment which can overwhelm and enhance difficult behaviour in an individual with ASD if they cannot mentally handle the independence and if teachers cannot provide a consistent routine that meets the individual's needs. Supporting this, not all teachers discussed routine in the same context, as from the perspective of a mainstream teacher below, it is suggested that the routine in a mainstream school environment can disrupt a child with ASD's behaviour:

*“Sometimes, the routine in a mainstream school can change rapidly and this can send an ASD child into meltdown and this is when they become extremely distressed without control”*

*(Anne (mainstream primary teacher), 19-21)*

## **Theme 2- Enhancement of social skills**

The contrast of the amount of social interaction had in a mainstream school environment in comparison to an SEN school environment was evident through the expression of both mainstream and SEN teachers' perspectives. This theme was evident through quotes surrounding how being in a mainstream environment can enhance social skills as observing and interacting with the other children enhances the opportunity to develop socially and understand how to behave in everyday social situations. Humphrey (2008:44) emphasises that pupils with ASD 'often struggle to

understand the unwritten rules that permeate everyday social interactions'. Therefore, this supports the highlighted perspective throughout most interviews that mainstream schooling is more beneficial to influence development opportunities in a child with autism through enhancing their social skills.

*"there's positives and benefits to it and you know there's other schools obviously that they could go to that would benefit them but in a mainstream school they also get the communication with other children that don't have SEND and that don't have specific needs"*

*(Anita (mainstream primary teacher) 15-18)*

*"I think some of the main benefits of being in a mainstream school is developing their social skills... as bad as it sort of might sound they might not get the same social interaction in a special school because of the various sort of needs in a special school"*

*(David (mainstream secondary teacher) 83-86)*

*"Mainstream school supports academic, social and emotional skills. Pupils with ASD are able to benefit from attending a mainstream school and will progress and develop likewise"*

*(Anne (mainstream primary teacher), 32-34)*

*"the ASD children don't always have peers to socialise with and the peers they do have are of the same ability so they have no role models in a sense"*

*(Julie (SEN teacher), 37-39)*

However, there was some discussion from both mainstream and SEN teachers' perspectives that suggested that a mainstream school environment may be socially overwhelming for the pupil with ASD. The following quotes support research conducted by Clements (2005:171) which conveys how the recognition of being different to others can be overwhelming for a child with autism and not being able to make friends and understand social situations can cause frustration. Also, research by Schäfer et al. (2004 as cited in Humphrey, 2008:43) further supports the quotes as it is suggested that research indicates that when bullying occurs in schools, a potential outcome for a child with autism is mental health and emotional well-being problems.

*“However, there are many cases where the social arena is extremely difficult for the child and as such can cause significant anxiety and frustration which can lead to secondary mental health difficulties”*

*(Sue (SEN teacher), 51-54)*

*“Yes I think that with regard to social skills it does give them an opportunity to interact with a larger number of other children however that can have an adverse effect as they get a little bit older maybe with mood swings maybe with... friendship groups maybe with not being able to handle fallouts... confrontation... things like that”*

*(Sophie (mainstream secondary teacher) 87-90)*

*“there’s not so much of an overwhelming or intense crowd as you would get maybe in a mainstream... there’s a lot... numbers are a lot higher in schools”*

*(Sophie (mainstream secondary teacher, 105-107)*

Furthermore, a contrasting view portrayed by an SEN teacher highlights how the SEN environment is more equipped to develop skills to function in the social world, suggesting that the mainstream environment comes with more risk as to whether the individual with ASD will develop due to them not being of the immediate attention within their mainstream schooling environment.

*“A specialist setting by its nature can provide a safer and secure environment for the child with the focus on developing the skills they need to function in the social world as opposed to mainstream and a fingers crossed strategy can be sink or swim.”*

*(Sue (SEN teacher), 57-60)*

Furthermore, research conveys how it can be problematic for teachers in a mainstream teaching environment with pupils with ASD as they do not receive any extensive training to understand and learn about the characteristics and behaviour of a child with ASD. Arguably, this lessens the opportunity for social development within the mainstream environment as if teachers are not receiving adequate training to assist with the progression of a child with ASD in school, this can have an adverse effect on the child, causing potential disruptive behaviour in the classroom if the child feels that their diversity is not being understood (Simpson et al., 2003:119) The following quotes support this in discussion about the struggles teachers face in a mainstream environment.

*“Mainstream teachers significantly so as in my experience frequently have limited training and knowledge of how to support the child, lack of resources and multidisciplinary working as well as the obvious issues with class sizes and other environmental factors.”*

*(Sue (SEN teacher), 67-71)*

*“SEN schools are better at dealing with behaviours though because they have better staffing and resources”*

*(Julie (SEN teacher), 25-26)*

### **Theme 3: Peer understanding and interaction**

The influence that peers have on children with ASD and their behaviour was a prominent topic throughout most interviews. Research by Symes and Humphrey (2011:62) supports the prominent perspective portrayed by many of the participants in stating that ‘peer group relationships are increasingly viewed as a key indicator of successful inclusion of pupils with ASD.’ Each of the teachers discussed the relationship of ASD children and their peers and how it can have a negative effect on the individual with ASD and their behaviour if the other pupils are non-accepting or do not understand the diversity of an individual with ASD. Each interview expressed both similar and contrasting views based on their individual experience, however it was clear that if an ASD pupil felt rejected by their peers it can cause their behaviour to deteriorate. The following quotes support research by Chamberlain et al. (2007 as cited in Adams et al., 2016:3557) which highlights how ‘mainstreamed students with ASD...are less liked by peers...more likely to be rejected, ignored, and purposely excluded by the peer group’:

*“Bullying is also a factor in a mainstream environment because children with autism often present as eccentric and struggle to fit in causing them to be a target which may cause their behaviour to worsen if they feel unaccepted by their peers”*

*(Sue (SEN teacher), 58-60)*

*“They need small group interaction but this was hard as other pupils are reluctant to work with them”*

*(Julie (SEN teacher), 31-33)*

Research by Zablotsky et al. (2014 as cited in Adams et al., 2016:3557) reinforces evidence discussed from the SEN teachers that ‘students with ASD in general

educational classrooms are more likely to experience peer victimization than those...with ASD in special education...' which is clearly supported by some of the SEN teacher's perspectives. However, it could be argued that as both quotes descend from the perspective of SEN teachers, they do not have the same extent of experience teaching children without SEN of that of a mainstream teacher, as the perspectives from the mainstream teachers presented below after being asked the same questions seemed to present a more positive outlook:

*"I think pupils especially in my school are very good with pupils with ASD because they sort of have an understanding of it and they do realise that they're a little bit different I think the hardest thing for someone with ASD to accept is that they're different and perhaps in a special school erm that transition of them realising that they're a little bit different could be abit easier in terms of behaviour"*

*(David (mainstream secondary teacher), 107-112)*

*"behaviour wise it allows them to see how other pupils behave in schools and it will allow them to maybe bounce of those other pupils so if behaviour is good and they are surrounded by good behaviour and nicer pupils, the pupils that are creative and want to learn and are interested in, in different subjects I think an ASD pupil would do, would thrive of something like that"*

*(Sophie (mainstream secondary teacher), 92-97)*

On the other hand, another perspective from a mainstream teacher in a primary school identifies the lack of understanding other children have of the child with autisms behaviour which perhaps is down to the children's age and naivety in a primary school setting:

*"some aspects aren't so great with them being in a mainstream school as they might contrast with other children that maybe don't follow the rules and they can get frustrated and can get angry maybe at that other child or angry towards the teachers and I think sometimes that can also affect other children in the classroom and they might not understand why that child is getting so frustrated and sometimes it can disrupt lessons"*

*(Anita (mainstream primary teacher), 68-73)*



## Critical Evaluation

As the number of children with ASD receiving their education in the mainstream school environment is continuously increasing, it is crucial to ensure that the child with ASD is situated in the school environment that will be most beneficial for their development. It is also important to ensure teachers have a significant understanding into ASD and how to react to the behaviour issues that may present with the disorder.

Focusing on both mainstream and SEN teacher's perspective provides an insight into the views of those who have taught various children with ASD throughout their career in each school environment and so therefore have multiple experiences of behavioural difficulties presented by those with ASD. The previous literature into this area does not tend to combine the perspectives of SEN teachers with mainstream and so this present study has developed an insight into ASD children in different school environments and the behavioural difficulties from the perception of the teachers involved in each school.

This research draws the conclusions that there are ways to reduce behavioural difficulties of a child with ASD if teachers develop an understanding of the diversity of the disorder and discover how to handle each child's unique personality. The results indicate from theme 1 that routine and consistency are key to reduce behavioural difficulties in both the mainstream and SEN environment. Theme 2 highlights that social skills can be enhanced in a mainstream environment and by observing and learning how other children behave; this can develop and improve the behaviour of a child with ASD. Theme 3 conveys how this can also be helped when peers interact and understand the child with ASD's diversity as when the child with autism feels accepted, their behaviour seems to improve.

Overall, the present study makes a contribution to the increasing amount of literature that surrounds ASD and the mainstream and SEN school debate. Following the examination of the research question with the responses gathered from the participants, three key themes were identified which made links with, and was supported by the review of literature covered in the introduction. However, some limitations were evident throughout which therefore leaves areas for expansion that could be used for potential future research into the topic.

Firstly, the sample size used in data collection was quite small which could be argued as a limitation of the research. The literature surrounding qualitative research studies emphasises that in qualitative research you do not need as many participants than you would for a quantitative study, as a small sample allows the researcher to facilitate closer relationships and enhances the validity of the in-depth data gathered (Crouch and Mckenzie, 2006). However, there should be a large enough sample to gain efficient

data to form various common themes that become clear throughout the data. Thereby, generalization of the data can be considered as a limitation of the research as it does not cover a wide range of teacher's perspectives. Furthermore, as the interviews lasted around 30 minutes each, this is only a short time to grasp an individual's full elaborated experience of the topic. Therefore, future research could use a larger sample size to increase validity and extend the interview length in order to develop a deeper insight into teacher's perceptions of ASD children's behaviour in either a mainstream or SEN school.

Also, due to the participants' varying levels of experience with ASD pupils in their classes, the nature of the findings may have been influenced due to the teachers with more experience of ASD children maybe being more educated on the topic in question. Although, this potential issue may have provided a more diverse representation of the target population with each participant having differing amounts of experience of the topic. Therefore, future research could compare perspectives from the research data with regard to the different demographics such as experience in teaching, gender of the teachers, age of the teachers, and if perspectives are different based on the participants demographic. In summary, this research study effectively evaluated the research surrounding the topic areas and contributed to the research area by considering the perspectives of both mainstream and SEN teachers collaboratively based on ASD children and their behavioural difficulties.

## **Reflexive analysis**

I found encouragement and enthusiasm to conduct a piece of research based on the inclusive vs. SEN school debate with regard to ASD children due to my level of interest in educational psychology and special educational needs in particular. As a researcher I wanted to conceptualise teacher's personal experiences in both the mainstream and SEN environment to gather both insights and compare two perspectives from different angles based on the same topic.

As the current research aims to develop an understanding of individual experiences, a qualitative study was appropriate in order to gather more in depth, rich data. Reflexivity in qualitative research is a significant element and is described by Dean (2017) as 'the way we analyse our positionality, the conditions of a given social situation'. This therefore means that reflexivity is an insight into how the research affects the researcher. Mead (1934, as cited in Enosh and Ben-Ari, 2016) highlights that the process of reflexivity is looking back on the experience of the research process from the angle of the impact it has had on the researcher personally. Therefore, reflexivity may cause the researcher to adapt to a novel way of thinking and give them the ability to alter previous thoughts or perspectives that was previously thought about the research topic area.

After conducting several interviews, I feel that this has had an impact on my confidence and enhanced my social and interpersonal skills that are required for future employment. From my perspective, prior to conducting the interviews and having volunteered in the SEN department of a mainstream school, I expected that the mainstream teachers would be more negative towards the SEN schooling environment and SEN teachers the same towards mainstream. However, although this was the case for some, many of the teachers took a holistic view and weighed up the benefits and drawbacks to both types of education almost equally. To conclude, after actively researching educational inclusion with regard to ASD, it is clear that further research is needed to gather a deeper understanding into the teacher's perception to discover any significant impacting findings.

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